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# LESS GLAMOROUS BUT ESSENTIAL: AUSTRALIAN COMPOSERS' PERSPEC- TIVES ON WRITING ART MUSIC FOR CHILDREN'S PERFORMANCE

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## Introduction

The study of art music composed specifically for children's performance in Australia has been widely neglected until now, and the practice often misunderstood, with some composers working within the genre even considering such work as sitting at the 'less glamorous end of the composing business' (Ford in [Skinner 1991: 81](#))<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, many Australian art music composers have written, and are continuing to write, works specifically for children to perform and value such work highly for a variety of reasons, as this study will demonstrate. The article, importantly and for the first time, investigates the aims of contemporary Australian composers in writing art music for children's performance and demonstrates that many Australian composers who write for this genre view their practice as essential and of benefit to young performers in this country. We aim to enhance knowledge of work in this area by bringing their views to light through this pilot study so that it can be more widely understood and valued.

Our study has determined that, despite the dearth of literature on this topic, there are many Australian composers who have written music for children's performance across a range of instruments and instrumental groupings and for varying performance levels. To date, however, there has been little scholarly research investigating this important corpus of work, nor the background (including specialised training and the intentions) of composers writing in the genre. We aim to address part of this gap in this article, focusing on the experiences and perspectives of a range of contemporary art music composers across Australia. After establishing the context for the study through a brief history of the genre, a review of existing literature in the area and an overview of the study's methodology, the article analyses the results of two surveys, conducted from 25 June to 12 September 2018 and 22 October to 14 December 2018, and completed by a sample of 77 established Australian composers who have written music for children's performance. The composition process used by participants is considered and the question is raised of whether a specialised skill set is required to successfully write for this genre.

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## Art Music for Children's Performance

The term, 'art music', is used in this article to differentiate between high art music and that in folk and popular traditions. While, according to Von Glahn & Broyles (2013), the term, art music, has become, over time, problematic to define, it most commonly refers to music that stems from the Western music tradition (although frequently in contemporary times art music is found to be hybridised). The point of exploring art music in this article, as opposed to folk, popular and other music traditions, is not to posit an elitist view surrounding highbrow and lowbrow music cultures but rather to explore art music precisely because writing art music for children's performance has, at times, been seen by composers to be a less worthy pursuit, compared with composing music for professional performers<sup>2</sup>.

Through our research, we have come to define 'music for children's performance' as music that is composed for children to perform rather than music that is specifically composed for children to listen to or by which they are purely entertained. For the purpose of this research, 'children' are any persons under eighteen years of age, and 'performance' refers to the children singing or playing an instrument in any setting, including lessons and rehearsals<sup>3</sup>. The works might include, for example, a commissioned piece for school choir, a flute method book designed with children in mind, or a collaborative piece between a composer and children. As will be shown further below, composers who write in this genre will generally consider the technical playing or singing abilities of young musicians and, at times, will attempt to tap into their broader interests. Music for children's performance can also include roles for children within a larger work for predominantly adult performers, for example, a section for a children's choir in a symphonic work for otherwise professional performers.

It is important to note that some music that is suitable for children's performance can also be equally suitable for adult musicians, such as in community or amateur musical groups, and vice versa. Although this research will not expressly explore this overlap, it is important to keep in mind that some works may fall under more than one performance or performer category.

In terms of compositional process, music for children's performance might be composed collaboratively with young musicians so that it includes their creative input or in consultation with a director who is aware of the technical abilities and interests of the young musicians. Or, the music might be composed non-collaboratively for particular young musicians, or for a particular age group, ability level or instrumentation group. The music might also employ a theme or educational device that may be of interest or use to a young person.

At the Australian Society for Music Education (ASME) conference in Adelaide in 1971, Hungarian composer and pedagogue Erzsébet [Elisabeth] Szőnyi and Australian composer Martin Wesley-Smith presented a paper each on the topic of composing music for children's performance (Szőnyi 1971; Wesley-Smith 1971). Wesley-Smith and Szőnyi were both discussing identical genres: however, while Wesley-Smith referred to the term, 'music for children's performance', regularly in his paper, Szőnyi did not use the term at all, despite it being the title of her paper. Other terms used in the literature to describe this genre include 'music for children', 'children's music' and 'music for children to perform'. This points to the fact that music for this genre as a concept continues to lack a unified term. We contend, however, that 'music for children's performance' is the most succinctly accurate. Our hope is that through the current research, the term will become more widely accepted.

## A Brief History of Art Music for Children's Performance in Australia (1920s – Present)

Australian music for children's performance is not the main focus of any historical overview, but rather it fragmentarily occurs in the contexts of music education studies, in social histories, in companions, in conference proceedings or through the study of a specific composer or musical figure. It is not possible, due to the scope of this article, to provide a comprehensive treatment of the history of the genre. Rather, the article offers a brief historical overview of art music for children's performance in Australia over the past century to contextualise the work of the contemporary composers surveyed for this study.

When considering the children who are exposed to musical opportunities, Ian Lawrence (1978: 186) observes that

... it is still only a favoured minority of children who are given the opportunity to learn an instrument; for the majority, because "the voice craveth less cost" (Mulcaster) the massed singing lesson is still the most familiar feature of school music.



In order to understand how this has come to be, we will briefly look at musical opportunities for children since the nineteenth century. As an extension of Britain's music education system in the 1840s, Victoria and New South Wales introduced singing in schools and, on 22 December 1854, a massed choir of children from fifteen schools of different religious denominations performed at the Exhibition Buildings in Melbourne under the direction of George Leavis Allan ([Argus 1854: 4](#)). Almost half a century later, Hugo Alphen (1842 – 1917), a music educator and composer in New South Wales, conducted an estimated 10,000 school children in a performance of his work, *Federated Australia*, at the Inauguration of the Commonwealth in Centennial Park on 1 January 1901 ([Skinner 2008](#)).

Indeed, during colonial times and early Federation, most children were taught to sing, and playing the piano was commonplace. According to Michael Atherton ([2018: 21](#)), pianos were seen in almost every household in Australia and 'had started to become a highly visible commodity in the prosperity of the colonies in the years leading up to Federation'. Atherton ([2018: 43](#)) notes that colonial women undertook the role of playing and teaching the piano, and Louise Jenkins ([2008: 41–2](#)) states that women's involvement in private music teaching was invaluable in the evolution of Australian musical culture. Gordon Kerry ([2009: 12](#)) asserts that women 'simply got down and wrote the music that needed to be written for teaching young performers as well as more substantial works', and gives the examples of Miriam Hyde (1913 – 2005), Dulcie Holland (1913 – 2000) and Esther Rofe (1904 – 2000). Cantatas and operettas for school entertainment were also popular during the first half of the twentieth century. For example, a performance of Brahe's humorous cantata, *The Magic Wood*, was given at a state school concert in 1920 in Frankston, Victoria ([Mornington Standard 1920: 2](#)).

The advent of radio broadcasting in Australia in the mid-1920s allowed young people to hear music recordings more frequently, leading to an era of music appreciation in the classroom. According to Sir Hugh Allen, Director of London's Royal College of Music, this had deleterious effects on music in Australia, causing many Australians to only listen to music recordings rather than play an instrument ([Atherton 2018: 108](#)). While this is no doubt true, it is also clear that music education, as it had been known, was changing more broadly. School music education had become compulsory in Australian primary schools during the 1930s, and by the mid-1950s, the study of the recorder had begun to be adopted into the music syllabus ([Southcott 2016: 20](#); [Atherton 2018: 111](#)). This had been transplanted from the English school syllabus, the movement having been imbued by the revival of the Baroque instrument in the early twentieth century ([Southcott 2016: 17](#)). Boys' brass bands and percussion bands were employed throughout primary and secondary school systems from the late 1920s and secondary school instrumental music programs were also promoted during this time ([Stevens n.d.](#)). As Radic ([2007](#)) notes, Sir Bernard Heinze was a key figure in the development of music for children in this era in his work as coordinator of educational concerts during the 1930s and as a music educator for the Victorian Council of Public Education until 1957. The introduction, furthermore, of the Dalcroze Eurythmics movement in 1938 married movement and music, influencing the direction of music education, and the Orff-Shulwerk movement in the 1960s introduced instruments and music experimentation to the classroom.

Music in the classroom was no longer limited to piano and voice, making way for an entirely new way of exploring music through listening, movement and exposure to playing different instruments through rhythm, not just through melody and harmony. Australia, additionally more so than ever, was a melting pot of many different cultures, cuisines, philosophies, and artistic expressions. Multi-ethnic migrations had occurred from 1788 right up until Federation, particularly during the gold rush era. The White Australia Policy, introduced in 1901 soon after Federation, restricted non-white immigration up until the Second World War. After that time, waves of migrants from Europe and Asia arrived in Australia as a part of the country's 'populate or perish' program, leading the way for former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam to abolish the White Australia Policy in 1972. The country also began to be more inclusive of its original inhabitants, with the 1967 Referendum resulting in Aboriginal persons being counted in the population. It was a vibrant time in Australia and so it was too for Australian composers, who experienced an increase in commissions from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and organisations like Musica Viva Australia ([Green, n.d.](#)).

In terms of music for children's performance, operettas, cantatas, choral works and other stage shows continued to be composed and performed in the 1960s and 1970s, some now centring on new themes relevant to the time, displaying a consciousness of social issues and a change in societal attitudes. George Dreyfus (b.1928), a Jewish German who migrated to Australia in 1939, composed *Song of the Maypole* (1968), a twelve-minute cantata for children's chorus and full orchestra, first performed by various schoolchildren and the Canberra Symphony Orchestra and conducted by the composer. This work depicts the early convict days in Tasmania and the bloodshed of the Aboriginal peoples of the island. A work that also explores this topic is *There Is an Island* (1977), a children's cantata for choir and orchestra by Tasmanian composer Don Kay (b. 1933). Australian expatriate Malcolm Williamson's (1931 – 2003) *The Glitter Gang: A*



*Cassation for Audience and Orchestra* (1974) also explores Aboriginal social justice issues ([Philpott & Humberstone 2016](#)). The assertion of social activism through music sought to raise awareness of the contemporary issues and to educate children on these matters.

With the exposure to a wider range of instruments, possibilities in ensemble music writing for children's performance were broadening. More instrumental music was being composed: Ann Carr-Boyd's *Dance for Strings* (1978) for primary school string ensemble, Larry Sitsky's *Little Suite* (1964) for young players of violin and piano and Nigel Butterley's *Music for Sunrise* (1967) for recorders, flute and percussion written for Beecroft Public School Recorder Group in Sydney. Solo piano works for children's performance were, of course, still being composed during this time, with works written by Peter Sculthorpe, Martin Wesley-Smith, Michael Whiticker, David Chesworth, Michael Hannan, Miriam Hyde and Mary Mageau to name a few.

There was a revival of choral singing in Australian schools during the 1980s ([Campbell 2012: 127](#)). This coincided with a general rise in composition of choral music, vocal music and music theatre works in Australia in response to a higher rate of commissioning from more choirs ([Gifford et al. 2012: 173](#)). *Sing* songbooks were available at the time in conjunction with the popular Australian Broadcasting Corporation's program of the same name for primary schools, with contributions made by Australian composers such as Louise Pettinger and Lorraine Milne, who also directed the program from 1986 to 1992 ([Marsh & Whiteoak 2012: 119](#)). At the same time, concert bands were rapidly gaining popularity. Establishing school concert bands, as opposed to orchestras, became a practical way to offer school students large ensemble experiences.

Commissions have also been a way for composers to promote their music and earn a living. The 1988 Australian Bicentennial celebrations prompted the commissioning of a number of Australian works, including works for children's performance. Two examples of the latter include James Easton's *Gondwana! a musical* (1988), which was commissioned by Lane Cove Public School in Sydney and Judith Clingan's *Nganbra: a Canberra Canticle* (1988) for three SSA choirs, SATB choir, soprano voice, two baritones, flute, clarinet, bassoon, violoncello, ripieno student violoncelli, synthesiser, three percussion, didgeridoo and bass recorders, commissioned by the Australian Bicentennial Authority and the A.C.T. Administration and premiered at the Canberra Theatre by Gaudeamus, the Canberra Boys' Choir and Weston Creek High School on 7 October 1988. Many composers have also been commissioned by established music groups such as The Australian Children's Choir or Lyn Williams' Gondwana Choirs, which regularly commission and perform new Australian works.

Composer-in-residence programs have, in more recent decades, also aided in the development of Australian repertoire for children. In 1995, the ASME and the Australian Music Centre received funding from the Australia Council to establish a new composer-in-residence program. It has run biennially since 1995 and seeks to commission composers to write music for school and community-based ensembles ([Australian Society for Music Education n.d.](#)). Two composers selected to write music for this program were Stephen Leek, who wrote *Tungtare Two: Man to Tree: Five Songs for A Capella SATB Choir* (1997) for a combined choir of students from Brisbane schools, and Michael Sollis, who wrote *Giningininderry* (2013) for the Radford College Choir. In 2005, another program, *Composers\_Connecting\_Community*, was established by the Music Board of the Australia Council, which facilitated a composers-in-residence series for the Dandenong Ranges Music Council (DRMC) in Melbourne, Orchestras Australia and Youth Orchestras Australia ([Australian Music Centre 2007](#)). Composers, such as Calvin Bowman and Iain Grandage, were commissioned, through this initiative, to write large-scale works while working directly with young musicians. These programs are examples of two large-scale composer-in-residence projects designed to promote the composition of art music for children's performance in Australia.

The above examples are a selection of works composed for children's performance and serve only as an introduction to the history of the genre. Further research is still required in this area. This brief historical overview, however, demonstrates the prevalence of composers writing for young musicians and, for the first time, provides a context to consider contemporary Australian composers' perspectives on writing music for children's performance.

## Review of Existing Literature

Our review of the literature relating to the composition of music for children's performance in Australia has surveyed key sources that address





1. which composers have written music for children's performance in Australia, and why;
2. whether writing music for children's performance requires a specialised skill set and how this might be obtained; and
3. the key topics explored in the music and whether composers aim to cultivate a sense of national identity in the young musicians who perform their works.

The topic of music education in Australia has been widely researched throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. By 2004, in fact, music researcher Robin Stevens (2004: 340) concluded that this field of research had already 'come of age'. However, despite the integral role a composer plays in providing repertoire for the performer, there is a paucity of literature available on the topic of composers writing for young people in Australia and the implications of this within the context of music education. Nita Temmerman (2005) argues that the connections between school, home and community contexts are all essential and lacking in Australian music learning. Temmerman's research identifies two successful models of mentorship programs in Australia and suggests that more professional musicians should be employed to provide leadership to young musicians. This supports one of the main arguments of the current research: that the composer could help to positively shape the perspectives of young musicians. An example of a successful composer-as-role-model program is a 1999 composer-in-residence project at Meekatharra School of the Air in rural Western Australia (Yourn 2000). The program allowed students to work with a professional composer to write and perform their own music. One aim of the project was "to make music a realistic vehicle for students' investigation of the world in which they live", and one of the outcomes was that 'the project raised community awareness of composition and contemporary music as a valid art form, a "real" profession and a "real" personal option' (Yourn 2000: 32, 35–6). Although the current study is focused on composers writing for children's performance rather than facilitating student composition, the two practices are at times inextricably linked, and research into the composer as role model warrants further investigation in the context of youth development and music education.

As a professional composer new to writing music for young musicians, Canadian Michael Colgrass (2004) explores the musical and social benefits of composers working with young musicians in his article, 'Composers and Children: A Future Creative Force?' Colgrass gives the example of his own 'unsuccessful' approach to writing for a junior band to show why student composers should be integrated into programs for writing children's music during university. The research identifies a gap that is present between composers, teachers and young musicians and points to the benefits of building bridges between them.

In a more recent article, Andrew Sutherland (2018) considers the role of the children's chorus in symphonic and choral works in relation to compositional trends. He gives four reasons for why a composer might include a children's chorus in such works:

1. a composer is directly commissioned by an organisation that works with young musicians;
2. a work includes children's parts within the story and requires children to fulfil these roles;
3. a composer desires to include the unique timbral quality of children's voices; and
4. for 'enhanced community engagement and intergenerational understanding' (Sutherland 2018: 27).

Sutherland also draws on a letter written by a child involved in the premiere of Britten's *War Requiem* to argue that,

... children can learn from early interactions with adult music ensembles, living composers, and experienced orchestral conductors, and this strengthens their musical development. These life-changing experiences go beyond music education and shape attitudes towards music and community engagement that last throughout their lives (Sutherland 2018: 43).

The article concludes that adult musicians and living composers can influence the musical development and personal identity of a young musician, thus providing a rationale for further research to be undertaken in this area.

The way in which composers engage with young musicians is integral to this topic and has previously been addressed from several angles by researchers. As part of the ASME conference held in Adelaide in 1971, Szőnyi (1971) explained how the majority of contemporary composers in Hungary have come to regularly write music for children to perform. Szőnyi (1971: 20) noted the importance of this for music education in Hungary, stating, 'through this close acquaintance [with the composer] the children establish a living connection with contemporary music'. At the same conference, Wesley-Smith (1971: 22) outlined two aims a composer should have when writing music for children's performance: 'to provide music that will entertain, interest, and stimulate performers' and 'to provide music that will extend



their capabilities while remaining capable of effective performance'. In addition, both Szónyi and Wesley-Smith emphasised the need for composers to be respectful of young musicians, that a composer is not to 'bend down to children, but to rise to them' (Szónyi 1971: 21). As Jim Coyle (2018: 113) concludes in his thesis, Benjamin Britten (who was arguably one of the more famous international composers of art music for children's performance) made technical compromises in his writing but did not neglect the integrity of his compositional voice, which complements Szónyi's and Wesley-Smith's sentiments. Given the sincerity demonstrated in the approach of these composers, there is value in more widely surveying contemporary composers in Australia to divulge their aims in writing for this genre and to identify the potential benefits to young people.

During the 1988 Australian National Composers' Conference panel convened by Andrew Ford, numerous Australian composers and industry representatives relayed their experiences and views on children's music (Skinner 1991: 81–91). The discussion revealed that, at the time, composers and industry professionals alike considered it important for Australian composers to write music for children's performance. Australian composers Judith Clingan, Andrew Schultz and Malcolm Fox each asserted, furthermore, that composers must take into consideration the technical limitations of young musicians when writing music for them to perform. This sentiment is also emphasised by Colgrass (2004: 22), who states that 'composers should first carefully research the needs and requirements involved in writing a good piece for [children to perform]'.

Further acknowledgement of the significance of writing music for children's performance has been made by Australian composer Benjamin Thorn and researchers Adam Duncan and Bernie Andrews, who also discuss compositional techniques for writing for children's performance. Thorn (1997: 302–7) discusses the relevant musical characteristics required to create high-quality educational music for children to perform. He draws on his own compositions, as well as those by other local composers, to discuss the way in which incorporating twentieth-century techniques into educative music procures a student's musical growth and creative identity. Although Thorn's conclusions are limited to personal experience, his observation that composers can and do write stimulating and relevant new music for children's performance that fosters well-rounded musical abilities in children justifies further investigation.

In a case study which helps to reinforce Colgrass' conclusions, Duncan & Andrews (2015) analyse and discuss the learning experiences of eight composers who wrote music for a children's string ensemble as a part of a funded Canadian project. This study, although modest, helps to show that composers are not generally trained in writing music for children to perform, thus providing a reason for the lack of consistency in compositional output for young musicians in Canada and, as our research will show below, it seems likely that this can be extrapolated to Australia.

How composers and young musicians relate to each other is key, but so too is the way in which the music connects to social and cultural contexts. Scott Harrison (2005), to this end, argues for the benefits of embracing Australian music in music education. He acknowledges the existence of an Australian identity in music, drawing on the lyrics of popular Australian songs, such as Woodley and Newton's *I Am Australian*, and alluding to the thematic material conveyed through the titles of some Australian art music, for example, Sculthorpe's *Kakadu*. The author contextualises his research within the history of migrant Australia, then argues that music education in hegemonic Australia focuses mainly on Eurocentric and American content, which he discovered through a survey of school syllabi and tertiary course content. Harrison contends that music education in Australia is suffering due to a lack of culturally diverse components that would otherwise contribute to a complete Australian music identity, components including iconic Australian music, Australian art music, Indigenous music and repertoire from various cultures within our society. How then does the Australian composer help to change the musical landscape in music education?

In this regard, Carolyn Philpott's and James Humberstone's (2016) examination of *The Glitter Gang* (1973–1974), a cassation (mini-opera) for children's performance by Australian expatriate Malcolm Williamson, is relevant. Philpott and Humberstone assert that Williamson projects an Australian identity through the work, as well as his philosophical belief that music is for everyone. The article explores Williamson's views on social inclusivity, his reasons for and approach to writing his cassation, the social context in which *The Glitter Gang* was received and its educative and therapeutic benefits. This case study not only notes the varied reception of music for children's performance by a high-profile composer in 1970s Australia but also highlights the role a composer can play in influencing the



identity of Australian children. Another relevant study is our previous examination of Don Kay's *There Is an Island* (1977), a cantata for children's choir and professional orchestra (Caldwell, Philpott & Grenfell 2022). The work explores a potted history of lutruwita [Tasmania] and the plight of the island's First Peoples. For Kay, he hoped that, through the cantata, the young performers 'will feel more knowing of the historical events that took place [on the island] ... [and] that curiosities will be aroused to fill out that knowledge more' (Caldwell, Philpott & Grenfell 2022: 17). The case studies of the works by Williamson and Kay help to illustrate Harrison's claim that Australian repertoire is essential in cultivating a sense of identity and strengthening a sense of place in young people. Further research, however, is required in this area.

While there is limited existing literature in this area, the available sources reveal that composers can play an important role in helping to build social and musical connectivity by engaging with young musicians. This provides a rationale for further enquiry into the aims and approaches of Australian composers in writing music for children's performance. The need for this research is further supported by the suggestion in the literature of the technical considerations and wider challenges of composing for this genre, as well as of the benefits of this practice for composers, young musicians and wider society. Overall, the direction of this study has been informed by three significant themes apparent in the literature:

1. professional musicians can be role models;
2. the composition of music for children's performance is an art form; and
3. a sense of local and personal identity can be cultivated by children through their performance of Australian art music.

The following section outlines the design of the study.

## Overview of the Study

The key conclusions in the literature review led the authors to find

1. the reasons why Australian composers write music for children's performance,
2. whether writing music for children's performance requires a specialised skill set and, if so, how it is obtained,
3. what the aims of Australian composers are in shaping the perspectives of young musicians through their music for children's performance and
4. to what extent and in which ways Australian composers aim to cultivate a stronger sense of identity in young musicians, such as through the shaping of the child's perspectives on music in Australia, on where the child lives and their place within it and on creativity, their selves and their future possibilities.

This study employed a mixed-methods design. A quantitative approach was adopted to reveal statistical evidence regarding Australian composers who write for children's performance and their work, while the qualitative aspect enabled the collection of more detailed information about the composers' experiences, intentions, views and applications in writing for this genre, as will be explored below<sup>4</sup>.

## Data Collection Method and Tools

Data for the study were collected over two stages via the distribution of two separate surveys to eligible participants. Firstly, to gain a broad understanding of the existence of Australian music for children's performance, a database of composers who have contributed to the genre was compiled through searches of the following organisations' records: The Australian Music Centre; 28 schools (both government and non-government) and youth music organisations, six Australian publishers and the National Library of Australia. This process garnered the names of 331 composers, ranging from the nineteenth century to the present (Caldwell 2019: 139–87). Of these composers, 153 were identified as living and contactable through email.

The potential participants were then contacted via email and invited to contribute to the study. Each was provided with a participant information sheet that explained the intent of the research, that participation in the study was voluntary and that a completed survey implied informed consent. The following brief definition of music for children's performance was also provided: 'Music for children's performance is music that is composed for any person under eighteen years of age to perform'. The sections below describe the tools used across the two stages to collect data from participants.



## Stage One – Preliminary Survey

For the first stage of the project, we distributed a ten-question preliminary survey to 153 individuals to investigate the demographic of composers who have written music for children's performance and why and how they have done so. Three initial questions requested information about the gender of participants and whether they identified as both an Australian and a composer. Five subsequent questions addressed the participants' music for children's performance, one question requested participants to respond to a statement related to the topic and one question asked participants if they wished to be included in future research relating to this topic. The questions called for answers through multiple choice, checklists and rating scales and included the option for the participant to provide further information if they desired. See Appendix A for the preliminary survey questions.

## Stage Two – Second Survey

Participants who had expressed, in the preliminary survey, their wish to be involved in future research were invited via email to participate in a second survey. Of the fifty participants contacted, twenty were successfully recruited for the second stage of the study. The second survey consisted of twenty-eight questions and was presented in two parts. The first part of the survey provided an opportunity for participants to express their general experiences and their views regarding writing music for children's performance and the second part asked the participants to answer questions about a work of their own choosing that they had composed for children's performance. The survey questions were broad in nature and encouraged the participants to reflect and think critically regarding a range of issues relating to the topic with the aim of addressing the key questions of the study from a variety of perspectives. All questions in the second survey were open-ended and the participants could write as much as they felt necessary to appropriately answer the questions in relation to their experiences. At the end of each part, participants were also asked if they would like to include any further comments. See Appendix B for the second survey questions.

# Results and Discussion

## Stage One

In total, approximately 50% of the composers we contacted responded to our invitation to participate in the preliminary survey. Altogether, 77 Australian composers who have written music for children's performance participated in stage one of the survey. Of these, approximately 66% are male, 33% are female, and 1% identify as an unspecified gender. Of the total number of eligible respondents, 25 perceived they had written 'a great deal' of music for children's performance, 14 perceived that they had composed 'a lot', 22 felt they had composed 'a moderate amount', 15 'a little', and one provided no answer for this question but has composed music for children's performance. All 77 respondents identified themselves as a composer or an arranger of music. Of these respondents, two identified first as a conductor, teacher or performer before identifying as an arranger or composer. Of the 77 respondents, 73 identified solely as Australian; three identified as Australian as well as at least one other nationality and one respondent identified exclusively as another nationality but is included in the study as they reside in Australia.

The preliminary study found that Australian composers write music for children's performance for a variety of reasons (see [Table 1](#)). Participants were able to select as many reasons as they liked. Most composers are strongly interested in inspiring young musicians (82% of participants) and many composers are focused on educating young musicians through their music (77% of participants). Importantly, the data suggest that receiving an income or commission and writing for personal pleasure are reasons secondary to writing to inspire or educate young musicians. One-third of respondents, furthermore, are concerned with strengthening community networks through their music, suggesting that the purpose of the music can go beyond the music itself.

Most Australian composers writing for young musicians also write music for other age groups and abilities. Overwhelmingly, just over two-thirds (67%) of all respondents indicated that half or less of their compositions have been written for children's performance (see [Table 2](#)). Very few composers (6.5%), in fact, have written music exclusively for children's performance. Despite these statistics, our study indicates that a reasonably large quantity of music for children's performance does exist in Australia, with each of the 331 composers in our database having written at least one work for young performers.





**Table 1.** Respondents' Reasons for Composing Music for Children's Performance

Reason	Number of Responses
For personal pleasure	40
For educational purposes	58
To inspire young people	63
For income/I am commissioned	48
To strengthen community networks	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>235</b>

**Table 2.** Respondents' Estimated Percentage of Works Composed for Children's Performance

Percentage (%)	Number of Respondents
1–10	19
11–20	9
21–30	7
31–40	10
41–50	7
51–60	3
61–70	1
71–80	7
81–90	8
91–100	6
Total	77

**Table 3.** Processes Used by Respondents When Writing Music for Children's Performance

Process	Number of Respondents
Only collaboratively <sup>a</sup>	4
Only non-collaboratively 1 <sup>b</sup>	18
Only non-collaboratively 2 <sup>c</sup>	15
Collaboratively <sup>a</sup> and non-collaboratively 1 <sup>b</sup>	18
Collaboratively <sup>a</sup> and non-collaboratively 2 <sup>c</sup>	1
Non-collaboratively 1 <sup>b</sup> and non-collaboratively 2 <sup>c</sup>	2
Collaboratively <sup>a</sup> , non-collaboratively 1 <sup>b</sup> and non-collaboratively 2 <sup>c</sup>	14
Only collaboratively with a publisher <sup>d</sup>	1
Answer not given	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>

<sup>a</sup>Collaboratively with young musicians, <sup>b</sup>Non-collaboratively with a particular young musician or musicians in mind, <sup>c</sup>Non-collaboratively with no particular young musician or musicians in mind, <sup>d</sup>Category generated by individual comments



To create music for children’s performance, Australian composers use a range of writing processes. Of the 77 respondents, 74% have worked directly, in some capacity, with young musicians while writing their music, either collaboratively with young musicians or non-collaboratively with a particular young musician or musicians in mind (see [Table 3](#)). On the other hand, thirty-three respondents have worked indirectly with young musicians, that is non-collaboratively with no particular young musician or musicians in mind and, of this cohort, sixteen practice in this way exclusively (see [Table 3](#)). When asked to provide further information, some of these respondents explained that they work indirectly with young musicians by writing solely for a general age or ability group of young performers, for example, by using a guideline set out by a publisher or through having obtained an understanding of children’s playing or singing abilities.

According to the survey results, three out of four Australian composers employ an extra-musical theme or a combination of themes in their music for children’s performance (see [Table 4](#)). The most highly selected thematic category is ‘exploration of sound’, illustrating the significance to respondents of the curated experience of sound. This selection is followed by the thematic categories of ‘flora and fauna’, ‘Australia’, ‘place’, ‘environmental issues’, ‘history’, ‘family or friendship’, ‘youth and growing up’, ‘spiritual’, ‘social justice issues’, ‘love’, ‘political issues’ and ‘prejudice’, themes which potentially explore many facets of the human experience. The two additional thematic categories of ‘humour’ and ‘storytelling’, were likewise generated by a small number of respondents. These results show that many composers are interested in conveying concepts to young musicians that go beyond musical ideas: their music tackles a variety of themes from an Australian composer’s point of view that can potentially be absorbed by young musicians.

**Table 4.** Themes Conveyed by Respondents in Music for Children’s Performance

Theme	Number of Responses
Exploration of sound	38
Flora and fauna	37
No particular theme	36
Australia	33
Place	29
Environmental issues	23
History	23
Family or friendship	22
Youth and growing up	19
Spiritual	16
Social justice issues	15
Love	15
Political issues	10
Prejudice	5
Storytelling <sup>a</sup>	3
Humour <sup>a</sup>	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>326</b>

<sup>a</sup>Indicates category generated by individual comments

Most Australian composers writing for children’s performance (83%) agree, furthermore, that performing original Australian music helps to cultivate a stronger sense of identity in young musicians (see [Table 5](#)). This shows that Australian composers writing music for children’s performance see value in young musicians performing Australian music and seek to shape their perspectives through their music. Participants were also invited to justify their response with a brief explanation. The reasons given for agreeing with this statement are as follows<sup>5</sup>:

1. ‘It shows young Australian musicians that there are composers living in their country. This reduces the gap between composer and young musician and reinforces to children that creativity is attainable to them’,
2. ‘It teaches young musicians to have a sense of pride and an understanding of the uniqueness of Australia and its culture’ and that ‘homegrown music can help break down barriers and encourage respect for people who are of different backgrounds’,



**Table 5.** Respondents’ Answers to the Statement, ‘Performing Original Australian Music Helps to Cultivate a Stronger Sense of Identity in Young Musicians’

Answer	Number of Respondents
Strongly agree	44
Agree	20
Neither agree nor disagree	9
Disagree	3
Strongly disagree	0
Answer not given	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>

3. It promotes an understanding of the musical language of Australia,
4. It can teach young musicians about their society, lives of others, varied environments and occupations,
5. ‘Music can express the idea of “place” or “psyche of place”. Thinking about “place” can help develop a personal and relevant approach to a student’s own music through improvisation or performance’,
6. It offers a ‘greater sense of ownership and closeness to the material/subject matter’ and the music is more relatable for the young musicians and
7. Young musicians playing Australian music will help to secure an artistic legacy for Australia

Respondents who do not necessarily agree with this statement believe that it depends on which Australian works the children are performing and whether the young musicians know the piece is Australian or not. Some respondents, furthermore, question the existence or definition of an Australian music, as opposed to a nationalistic music, and conclude, therefore, that there could be no impact. A small number of these respondents also suggest that a work for children’s performance can only cultivate a sense of identity in young musicians when a clear theme is present. The second stage of the study explored in more depth the backgrounds, practices and experiences of twenty of the participants.

## Stage Two

This section consists of the results and analysis of the qualitative data collected from the second survey. The authors have applied thematic analysis: specifically, the model designed by Attride-Stirling (2001). According to Attride-Stirling (2001: 390), the ‘full process of analysis can be split into three broad stages: (a) the reduction or breakdown of the text; (b) the exploration of the text; and (c) the integration of the exploration’. It involves: coding the material, identifying themes, constructing thematic networks, describing and exploring thematic networks, summarising thematic networks and interpreting patterns.

Applying this model to our data revealed three key themes:

1. the composition process is organic
2. inspiration is essential and
3. music for children’s performance is multi-faceted.

This section will demonstrate how the results from the second survey support these key themes. Key quotes from the data provided by twenty participants are included in this section<sup>6</sup>.

### 1. The Composition Process Is Organic

#### The Genesis of a Work

First, the survey results show that writing for young musicians is born out of the circumstances which surround the composers. Some survey participants began writing for their students out of necessity. Adrian Hallam recalls, ‘I began writing music for my beginner brass



students. They had to perform pieces at an end of year concert. I could not find music which was suitable or engaging'. Similarly, Lorraine Milne remembers:

In my first year of teaching music in primary schools, I was working in the inner-city suburbs where children came mainly from working-class families, migrant families [living in] the high-rise flats. The songs we had to teach were mainly old English songs ... with the odd American folk song thrown in. Nothing Australian (apart from the odd Aussie Christmas carol by Wheeler and James). The kids ... could not relate to these songs, and neither could I as a teacher in this environment. This drove me to write new songs for children.

Other composers in the study came to write music for children's performance while they were children themselves. Dindy Vaughan says:

I wrote music for fellow students from primary school onwards — I would have started about age eight ... later in high school I wrote satirical songs for fellow students to sing and perform.

Judith Clingan recalls as a fifteen-year-old:

I began to arrange folk songs, and to teach children to sing these folk songs because I didn't like the sort of songs which ... my high school choir had given us (which were fairly saccharine) ... I was looking for a different feeling in what I could give the children to sing.

Some participants came to write music for children's performance in other ways, for example, composer and choral conductor Heather Percy states:

I began writing music for children as there was an emphasis at Eisteddfods to choose Australian repertoire ... I thought I would have a go and realised that I enjoyed composing ... [and] was able to craft choral music that specifically catered for my choirs.

The above examples demonstrate that the composers in this study first composed for young musicians in response to opportunities that became apparent at specific moments in time. In each case, the opportunity to create was self-generated by the composer (that is, through a strong desire to spontaneously create) or was externally presented (for example, a chance to fill a gap in the market).

Secondly, the data further show that opportunities are dependent on a variety of factors, such as available resources (for example, young musicians and the calibre of performers), invitations to compose, level of support from colleagues and what is occurring within a wider context. In relation to opportunities, Gail Godber states:

one [school] asked me to compose a song about skin cancer awareness and prevention (the principal had first-hand experience and was passionate about preventing his students repeating his mistakes). The SunSmart Song was printed in the 1995 ABC *Sing!* songbook.

Here, Godber was invited to create a work in response to a relevant topic. She also had a pool of young musicians in a primary school to perform her work. Another example of how creativity can generate opportunity is given by composer Michael Sollis, who recalls:

I initiated a program called SoundACT, where a group of composers wrote for school ensembles in the Canberra community. In its first year we had close to five hundred school students perform new works written by composers at the ANU School of Music.

Sollis identified the possibility of creativity through the use of available resources in his environment, that is, university student composers and local schools. In terms of writing in response to what might be occurring in a wider context, Dindy Vaughan states, 'I relate it [music for children's performance] to what is going on around us; celebrations, concerts for Oxfam, major festivals, and above all the land'.

Opportunities to compose music for children are, therefore, often determined by factors external to the composer, such as the availability of young musicians for a performance, an upcoming concert or a collaboration with a music director<sup>2</sup>. This means, fundamentally, that



music for children's performance tends to arise from the unique set of practical circumstances which surround it, and the composition of such music can therefore be considered an organic process denoted by a harmonious relationship of the various elements.

Thirdly, the results of the second survey show that most composers in the study learned to write music for children's performance while they were composing and their music education, at a tertiary level or otherwise, did not necessarily provide them with a specific skill set for composing in this area. Composer Don Kay reflects, 'although formally qualified as a musician and teacher, I'd had no formal training in composing for young people or "children"'. Fellow participant James Madsen likewise notes, 'my composition training was part of my music education degree but not specifically for children's music'. Matthew Hindson also received no formal training in this area, admitting 'it [composing for children's performance] was all trial and error combined with seeing [or] hearing what others have done'. Similarly, Sue Moxon recalls:

I began writing for children's performances when working in schools both in Japan and later in Australia ... it was assumed that I would naturally know what to do and to be honest, I learnt as I went along.

These participant experiences support Colgrass' (2004: 21) observation that most composers are not formally trained in writing music for young musicians to perform. This does not suggest that the quality of compositions in this area is necessarily poorer. It reveals, rather, a general lack of awareness of the importance of this genre of music, for composers, young musicians and the wider community. The idea that composers write music for children's performance, despite them not being formally encouraged to do so, perhaps also corroborates the idea that writing music for children's performance is organic and essential.

## The Process of Composing

The results of the second survey demonstrate that composers who write for this age group view music for children's performance and music for other performance groups as equally important. Vaughan states, in relation to music for professional or adult musicians, that 'music for kids must be just as valid'.

Similarly, Stephen Leek explains, 'I treat young musicians like I would any professional musician with the understanding of their musical and technical abilities — I do not write down to them just because they are children.

The results show that this attitude is prevalent among the composers surveyed as well as integral to their work.

In comparison to writing for professional musicians, one key difference in writing music for children to perform is that the varying capabilities of the young musicians, technical or otherwise, must be kept in mind. One anonymous participant writes,

you [the composer] have a different set of parameters to work with; these can be different topics of relevance, understanding, maturity of voices, interest, musical ability, sound, instrumentation, and even personality and daring of choristers and director.

Additionally, composer Roger Schmidli notes, 'obvious limitations required for instrumentation [or] technical ability and so forth are a down side; but, the limitations make it simpler to get going with a more limited palette of potential outcomes to choose from'.

While the relationship between a composer and a student is, of course, subject to power dynamics, the composers in this study pointed out that they were focused on understanding the technical capabilities of the young musicians, pointing to their will to communicate with young musicians through their music. This is perhaps no different from an author using an appropriate level of conventional language in their children's books.

Despite having to keep in mind the technical performance abilities of young musicians, some composers see the process of writing music for children's performance to be similar to writing music for adult or professional musicians. Percy asserts, for example, that 'the process is not different, but the level of complexity that you are able to achieve from a single idea is different'. In contrast, however, Moxon notes:





It [writing for children's performance] is perhaps more hands on. I am trying to hit the mark that will appeal to the children and help them feel satisfied and excited and willing to be an active part in the production. I never like to dumb things down but in writing for children this sometimes occurs e.g., ... complicated polyrhythms are done 'basically' and left at that. Longer more taxing works I avoid.

In terms of bringing a piece to life, Sollis acknowledges that the process is:

no different to processes for any piece of music. Certainly [I make] sure I visit the performers, work with them as closely as possible, and have as much opportunity for workshop as possible.

Another way in which the writing process is organic is that the composers seek to engage young musicians through the music they compose. Vaughan declares:

it's hard work! You must know in great detail what each performer is capable of, and what the group as a whole can handle; you must engage kids on every level with the music, they need a broad understanding of what the work is about, and you must kindle enthusiasm.

Similarly, Schmidli states:

I never want students to feel that a piece is "pedestrian". There needs to be something there for them *and* there needs to be something there for *every* instrumentalist at some point in the work to "hang their hat on" so to speak.

Some composers also involve young musicians in the early stages of the composition process. Hallam notes:

[I identify] engaging subjects. [And] I use a programmatic structure. Telling a story with music fires up the imagination. ... I ask students what are they interested in? If you could choose a piece of music, what would it be about?

Similarly, Godber writes, 'my process always was to canvas ideas with the students, so that they felt ownership of the end product'. Madsen, on the other hand, holds 'workshops to allow children to be part of the creative process of writing the music'.

The results of the second survey show that many composers have come to write music for children's performance in response to a set of surrounding circumstances. Self-generated and externally presented opportunities, interactions with young musicians and a feeling of necessity to write for this age group all motivate the creative process. To many of these composers, writing music for children's performance has been an essential undertaking and one that is equally as important as composing music for adult or professional performers. Above all, these composers aim to inspire young musicians, a concept which will be discussed in the following section.

## 2. Inspiration Is Essential

### The Reasons Why Composers Write for Young Musicians

The data from the second survey demonstrate that, when writing music for children, many composers are conscious of the ways in which their music can be rewarding for this particular demographic. Hindson states:

I aim to write music that is fun and enjoyable for children to play. I aim to write music that is worth a challenge, and which is technically within their abilities to create an interesting and worthwhile sonic result.

Godber also considers the benefits to the children as paramount: 'original songs, written with the students, give them a voice to communicate the things which worry them, as well as possible ways to remedy the situations'.

For the young musician, the music or interaction with a composer may also bring enjoyment and motivation to practice or learn music or to explore a subject related to a particular piece of music. It may not only enable the development of technical skills, performance skills and musical knowledge but also inspire creativity or an understanding of the self. It can also offer an opportunity for self-expression.



Evidence from the survey data suggests that most Australian composers aim to inspire children in a variety of ways. The majority aim to communicate ideas through their music and through their interactions with young musicians. As Leek declares:

[through writing music for young musicians, I aim to achieve] great connections, developing empowerment, skills and the love of music-making in young people. [As well as] communications [sic] of ideas and feelings with young people.

Another participant, who wishes to remain anonymous, writes:

children need to understand that anyone can compose. The composer can be their teacher, aunty, mum, uncle, grandpa, school teacher or sports coach. Children need to see that local people, in their environment (and country) can write good music, and that they might be able to as well.

In addition, Madsen explains:

I aim to create music that inspires [children]; helps them understand their feelings, expressions and human emotions; to allow them to build skills in improvising and composing themselves; to explore the concepts of music and make them more aware of the workings of music.

It is through this communication of ideas (musical ideas, the enjoyment of music, the role of the composer, the impetus to be creative, the reflection and exploration of the self in music) that composers can help to shape the perspectives of young musicians.

The qualitative data of the second survey also confirm that music can provide the opportunity for young musicians to learn a range of material in an enjoyable way. As Godber explains:

music can be a great teaching tool. Teachers have often requested songs to assist in learning a relevant lesson in literacy or numeracy. One song I wrote was a simple instructional ditty about hand-washing, to try to throw light on this vital behaviour, and encourage awareness and change attitudes.

Composer Loreta Fin adds:

[I aim] to teach [young musicians] important orchestral skills and techniques, but done in an enjoyable and engaging way. There is plenty of time to play Mozart and Vivaldi when they are equipped technically.

Nurturing learning, for example, of musical techniques or concepts in an enjoyable way is an important aspect of the role a composer might play in shaping the perspectives of young musicians. Many composers, however, also intend to educate young musicians in a broader sense, beyond the structure of music and through the exploration of ideas surrounding the human experience.

## Seeking and Providing Inspiration

The results from this study show that many works by the participating composers have been informed by other fields of interest, such as science, the environment, art, literature and philosophy. As Godber admits, 'good food, gardening, loving relationships, reading, listening, climate and the environment have all inspired [my] musical works'. Similarly, Hallam writes, 'my works have been influenced by history and general interest', and Madsen states, 'most of my music, especially choral music, has lyrics based around the natural environment and how this relates to the human spirit'. These are just some of many examples. As Kay contends, 'music is an all embracing means of expression so its capacities to convey ideas are unlimited'.

Other composers acknowledge the benefits of drawing on other fields of interest to inform their works, but do not always use this approach when writing. According to Hindson, 'having an outside field of interest can be handy in helping the students make a connection between seemingly abstract music and something tangible. It's not entirely necessary, however'. Linda Kouvaras likewise notes:



My titles are predominantly narrative [or] descriptive and are catalysed by ‘the wider world’ – often through my emotional response to people (e.g., *Little Piece for Ari* – referring to my close friend’s then-young son; *A Day in the Life of Nurse Yelland* – re: my mother; *With Jenny Evelyn, 3rd-last day at Bundanon 1999* – an artist I encountered on my first residency at Bundanon); otherwise, my pieces have musical references (e.g., *12-Bar for Two* and *Blues in Three-Four*).

Some composers are even less likely to use other fields of interest to inform their compositions. Percy states:

I am not really influenced by external factors, but am greatly influenced by musical factors. When writing music for choirs in general, I think connecting the text to the music is greatly important, so elements of word painting and enhancing the text in the music greatly inform my compositions.

Evidently, the sources that composers draw on are varied. This is at least partly due to the unique interests, experiences and views of each individual composer and is a crucial aspect to consider when studying their music, individually or collectively.

Significantly, the place where a composer lives can also influence the music they create. Here, place can be considered from two angles: place can be used for a thematic exploration in a piece of music, and it can have an impact on the opportunities afforded to a composer, especially the place in which they live. The latter idea harks back to concepts explored earlier in this article regarding opportunity and creativity. For example, Sollis reflects:

I have always lived in Canberra, and I guess most of the works I have written for children have been for Canberran children, so that has affected the work. I have also written some pieces for children that link to the local environment.

In a similar vein, Vaughan states:

I grew up in a bush town, we [my siblings and I] are of Aboriginal descent, my dad fought through two world wars, my parents were passionate about justice, freedom and education; [in my music,] I relate first and foremost to the land as a living entity, and to all the values of our upbringing.

These quotations help to show that place can operate as both a facilitator of creativity and a generator of content. To other composers, where they live may not feel quite as important. Leek writes:

where I live is a little irrelevant as I work all over the world. I am more interested in knowing the persons that I am writing for and usually spend some time with them to understand them and they to understand me.

Here, Leek speaks to an overriding desire to understand and communicate with people, rather than to a direct link to place. It could be argued, though, that the performers’ experiences may vary depending on where they live and this could help to inform the content of a work. The concept of place inspires many composers regardless and, as the results of the preliminary survey show, place is a theme that just over one-third of composers involved in the study explore within their music<sup>8</sup>.

Inspiration ultimately presents itself in many ways. Many composers seek to inspire young musicians through their music (via communicating ideas, musical or otherwise) and through their role as a composer. More specifically, the composers in this study aim to stimulate young musicians’ minds, to encourage creativity and contribute to the development of their musicianship and understanding of the world. Further, it is due to the very nature of each composer being a product of their own experiences that myriad unique musical works for children’s performance exist. These contribute collectively to the greater voice of Australian music. Access to this voice helps young musicians to engage with, be inspired by and to further understand the world of music and the world around them.



### 3. Music for Children's Performance Is Multi-faceted

#### Technical and Other Considerations

By its very nature, music for children's performance is multi-layered because it incorporates the involvement of many people and is influenced by varying sets of circumstances, factors and ideas. These elements contribute to the outcomes of a given work. From the perspective of the composers, music for children's performance, as touched upon previously, must be relevant to children in respect to both their musical and conceptual capabilities. For example, Milne notes, 'in terms of the music itself, I am aware of things such as the pitch of a song to suit young voices or size of hands [or] level of maturity with piano music'. Similarly, Hiscocks asserts, 'you have to be conscious all the time of the physical or technical limitations of a younger person's body'. Highlighting the further complexity of the issue, Kay writes:

I believe in trusting their [the young musicians'] aesthetic sensibility — not being afraid to lead them into unfamiliar territory, challenging them to keep with you on the journey of new discoveries. So, risk taking is part of the challenge. How far is too far? Being over safe or predictable is boring for all concerned.

The experiences of Milne, Hiscocks and Kay emphasise that, from the point of view of the composers in the study, music for children's performance should be suitable for children on both technical and conceptual levels. There is, perhaps, as Kay acknowledges, an element of risk on the composer's part regarding the assessment of the abilities of young musicians. If, however, the composer is aware of the need to address these abilities, then the outcome is likely to be more successful.

In addition, some of the general characteristics of children can also contribute to the outcome of the music being composed. Like many composers in the study, Clingan observes that:

[the young musicians] don't have preconceptions. That's one of the marvellous things ... [—] a group of children, especially if you've been working with them for a few years and they understand you well, and you understand them, they will be happy to do anything. They don't have notions about what they *should* be doing.

Understanding the performers is clearly important in the creation of music for children's performance. Observing technical and conceptual capabilities, performance skills, physical and mental stamina and then writing within set parameters (for example, range of notes, rhythm, characteristics of the instrument) all contribute to the creation of an effective piece of music.

#### Composers' Approach to Technique

To write successfully for children's performance, the composer must take all of the aforementioned factors into consideration. For this reason, composers who write music in this genre must develop a specialised skill set. In terms of technical writing, Hiscocks states, 'it is a good discipline to write directly and simply, and this approach needs to be applied on a physical as well as emotional level; it is a process that asks you to revisit the child in yourself'. In the same way, Schmidli contends, 'the old adage of simple ideas being the best means that some of my best works have been for younger musicians — [I have been] forced to be more concise and efficient with ideas'. Similarly, as Moxon notes, 'this [practice] forces you as a composer to think more creatively ... it's not a case of writing something and assuming it can be done'.

Despite the necessary simplification of musical material noted above by Hiscocks, Schmidli and Moxon, writing effective music for children's performance can be a complex process. Furthermore, the experience of writing music for children's performance extends beyond the act of completing a piece of music. Many composers view their experience of writing for this genre as beneficial to their development as a professional composer, for example, learning how to educate through music, learning how to express oneself clearly and concisely through music and developing a strong understanding of the idiosyncrasies of instruments. The practice of composing for children's performance can also help a composer develop respect for colleagues, such as music directors or teachers, develop a reputation through performances or receive networking opportunities. Many composers view flexibility of mindset as a key skill, as they



must adapt and re-adapt to a given set of circumstances, including the response of the performers and the subject matter. Hindson remarks, '[writing music for children's performance] has forced me to be clear and direct. This has flowed over into my "adult" music, also. I consider this to be a positive flow-on effect'. In a similar fashion, Ralph Hultgren says, 'writing for children heightened my awareness of the need for the musicians to be able to connect to the music both technically and conceptually'. In addition, Kay reflects,

The practical experience of trying to make things work for young performers with them having limited performance skills force[s] one to express clearly within clear constraints – i.e., be true to yourself in spite of those constraints. That's a lesson I've never forgotten ... [Also], I found it easier in my early formative years to gain performances with young people. Having your own work [performed] is the major means of achieving self-credibility ... [Furthermore, writing music for children's performance teaches one] to be respectful of performer colleagues and trustful of their capacity to help realise your intentions or even exceed your anticipations by adding a new dimension.

These examples show that both music for children's performance and writing music for children's performance are multi-faceted. The experiences and outcomes are complex and many layered and are not just of benefit to young musicians but to the composer too, both artistically and professionally. The relationship between composer, young musician and the music composed is variable. By its very nature, music for children's performance represents many layers of human interaction and communication.

## The Wider Context

This final section of the stage two results will address music for children's performance within the wider context of Australia. Composers' observations are varied regarding the promotion of music for children's performance and the significance that this genre of music has within the country. First, the promotion of music for children's performance differs in terms of success. For example, Milne notes, 'currently it is very difficult to get material published or recorded unless you self-publish. One of the hardest issues for individual composers is the whole area of marketing and promotion'. Madsen explains:

I think there is such a vast array of people doing different things for music for children. Some get promoted very well while others are not. From my own experience, I have had a very difficult time getting support from media, networks and funding bodies. One response from a funding application was that my project was too 'niche'. Children's music is apparently too 'niche'. On the other hand, the music education sector has been very supportive of what I do, but that has come from my own efforts of marketing my material and getting it out there.

As a further example, Schmidli reflects, 'in my area of wind band [and] big band, my publisher (Brolga) and a few others have made huge strides in this direction but it mostly all comes down to education of our music educators'. Conversely, Sollis states, 'I think it [music for children's performance in Australia] is quite well promoted'.

Overall, however, most composers observe that it is challenging to successfully promote original music for children's performance within Australia. Some, though, recognise that music is better promoted and composers are better supported within particular areas of specialisation, for example, choral music. In addition, some composers self-publish or self-promote, while others are signed to publishing companies or practice a combination of these activities. Composers who are successfully supported also acknowledge that other composers may not be.

Most composers within this study believe that, despite the difficulties presented by constraints surrounding publishing and promoting, exposing children to Australian composers and Australian music is important. Hindson's view is:

that if we want to help students with the idea of music being a living culture – not something created by other [people] of other times – then it is essential to make the link between performers, composers and audiences.

Similarly, Leek believes that 'young Australians need to find and communicate their stories and ideas through music making'. In the words of Don Kay:





Our culture absolutely depends on the health of our arts, the means by which [we will] be judged as a culture in the many years to come. What makes or will make us distinctive and special? The arts, not least music, are perhaps the major means of determining that. The younger this exposure the better and it needs to be consistent throughout, through all our formal education, so that we extend and deepen our aesthetic sensibility and powers of discrimination.

A similar statement was given by Kay's teacher, Malcolm Williamson ([1967: 290–2](#)), over fifty years earlier:

If these [Australian] composers can but learn to write for children, learn to write very much in their own musical styles but as simply, directly and clearly as possible, they will be creating a public for themselves and for their followers in the next generation, as well as creating a much richer musical culture in the nation.

Williamson's encouragement of his fellow composers to write music in a more accessible style for children, so as to educate future generations, resonates with the views of Hindson, Leek and Kay half a century on and warrants further consideration.

## Observations and Conclusions

Primarily, we have focused on investigating why and how contemporary Australian composers write music for children's performance. A mixed-method approach has been necessary both to establish the prevalence of individuals working in this specialised area of composition as well as to gain a more in-depth appreciation of the practice. The study, for the first time, reveals a plethora of insights from 77 practising composers and offers information on the backgrounds, outputs and experiences of a hitherto under-recognised cohort.

The results of the research have been presented in two stages: findings in stage one of the study emphasise that most contemporary composers who have written music for children's performance seek to inspire (82%) and educate (75%) young musicians. Approximately 80% of composers in the study have also composed music directly for a specific young musician or group of young musicians, collaboratively or non-collaboratively. The findings of stage two of the study show that, for many Australian composers who write for children's performance, the composition process is organic, inspiration is essential and the resulting music is multi-dimensional. Many composers also describe the personal pleasure they experience when writing for and working with young musicians, particularly through the satisfaction of writing a successful work and through the ability to bring enjoyment to children, which resonates with the sentiments previously expressed by Wesley-Smith. This is important to acknowledge in assessing the benefits for composers within this practice. These findings reveal, overall, that most Australian composers who write music for children's performance have a vested interest in the experiences and development of their nation's youth and that the practice can be beneficial to composers and children alike. This is significant when considering Temmerman's argument that the health of the Australian music education system depends on children being guided by professional musicians.

Michael Colgrass ([2004: 21](#)), reflecting twenty years ago on what he perceived as a dearth of composers writing music for young and amateur performers, suggested that one reason for this was that for composers, 'having a new piece of music played at the local elementary school is not as glamorous as a premiere with a symphony orchestra'. The results of the second survey demonstrate overwhelmingly, however, that participants believe writing music for children's performance is just as important as writing for other age and ability groups, that glamour does not define their compositional pursuits and that their aims are much less superficial. Some participants in the study did note that it has been difficult for them to promote their music for children's performance because this genre of music, they feel, is often viewed by others, including funding bodies, as being less important than music for professional musicians. Many Australian composers continue to persist with writing music for young musicians to perform despite these hindrances.

Colgrass ([2004: 21](#)) also observes that 'our conservatories and university composition programs simply don't ask composition majors to write for children'. Of the twenty participants who completed our second survey, those who undertook composition studies at a tertiary level did not learn how to write music for children's performance in their coursework, thus suggesting that Colgrass's observations also apply to the Australian context. That is not to say that no tertiary institution in Australia offers guidance in this area: if, however, it is offered it has not been captured within this study and is, therefore, perhaps rare. Colgrass's proposal that universities should require all



composition students to write at least one piece for young or amateur musicians is worthy of consideration and, in practice, may help to establish some normalcy around composing for the genre.

Further confirming Colgrass's findings, as well as those of Duncan and Andrews, our research has shown that composers who write music for children's performance do require a specialised skill set. This skill set can range from the composer's personal ability to interact with and engage young musicians to their proficiency in communicating musical ideas in a concise and meaningful manner and it can be self-taught and developed over time. The findings reveal, importantly, that, while these composers are required to make technical compromises, they insist on, and are capable of, maintaining the integrity of their compositional voice.

Participants in the preliminary study 'agree' or 'strongly agree' (83%) that performing original Australian music helps to cultivate a stronger sense of identity in young musicians. One reason for this belief is that exposure to Australian music shows young Australian musicians that there are composers working in their country and that creativity and careers in the industry are possible. The practice also fosters an understanding of the musical landscape of Australia as well as local social and cultural practices. It can, in addition, shape a young musician's understanding of place and therefore nurture their perception of the environment around them and, in turn, their own identity. Performing Australian music further allows young Australian musicians the opportunity to engage with familiar subject matter and to have common experiences reflected to them. Considering the wider picture, participants also noted that young musicians performing Australian music will help to procure an artistic legacy for the country. These sentiments resonate with Szónyi's account of the successful contemporary music culture in Hungary and its rich benefit to children. The survey data also reveal that many composers were aware of the part they play in inspiring young musicians to be creative and that by the act of being present as a composer, they show children that they too can write music. The composers, of course, have not collected data from the children themselves on this topic but, rather, this belief is based on their experience, and perhaps informal feedback from the children. This is, however, a promising finding when considering the future health of the Australian music industry and these beliefs could be used as a springboard for further research.

Harrison (2005: 120), in his article concerning music in the Australian education system, calls for more culturally diverse music to be present in the curriculum, rather than simply the Eurocentric and American material that prevails. Harrison raises a crucial point, given that Australia has become home to millions of people who are originally from, or are descendants of people from, many different countries, Australian children need music that mirrors the Australian experience: in this case, the cultural diversity that now exists in modern Australia. It is encouraging, in this regard, to see contributions to this area from our First Nations composers, such as Deborah Cheetham Fraillon, whose Dhungala Children's Choir in Victoria, founded in 2009 as a choir for Indigenous children, feature in several of her works, such as the opera *Pecan Summer* (2010) and, more recently, *Wominjeka Song Cycle* (2022) ([Short Black Opera n.d.](#); [ABC Classic 2022](#)).

In 1988, Judith Clingan called for more Australian composers to write music for children's performance at a grassroots level ([Skinner 1991: 86](#)). The current research suggests that this practice is reasonably prevalent, and perhaps has even increased over the last thirty years. Although this article provides long-overdue information on this practice, further work in this area is required. For example, analyses of a wider range of existing works in the genre; the instigation, funding, delivery and documentation of a variety of composer-in-residence programs within school or youth communities; more empirical research on the benefits for both the composers writing music for young people and the children experiencing this intervention; and an exploration of the barriers which prevent this practice from occurring. The current research is an early pilot study, the first of its kind in Australia, and we recommend it be used as a basis for future research into the views of composers, educators and children within this space. Such research and practical work in the area have the capacity to effect change at a national level, so that Australian music for children's performance can become commonplace and the role of the Australian composer can be more widely celebrated and valued in the context of a child's development, leading to many benefits for young people and practitioners alike.

## ENDNOTES

1. While Andrew Ford made this observation at the 1988 conference, 'The Composer Speaks', he is an advocate for children's music and has composed several works for children's performance.
2. It is also acknowledged by the authors that many composers, including those in this study, have written highly valuable music in the folk, popular and other music traditions, and that overlaps in styles are common in modern times. It is also important to acknowledge that Australia's Aboriginal




peoples have a rich music tradition involving their young people that spans many thousands of years: however, due to the scope of the article it will not be the focus of this research.

3. For the present research, it was necessary to define 'children' in terms of a specific age bracket, in this case as under the age of eighteen years. This is due to the school-leaving age being close to the age of majority, which is eighteen years in Australia.
4. Before gathering information from participants, the researchers obtained approval from the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee.
5. Points that appear in quotation marks are in the words of respondents.
6. Three of the twenty participants chose to remain anonymous. The others gave permission for their names to be included in any publications.
7. It should be noted that a composer may also establish their own set of practical circumstances, for example, recruiting young musicians to perform their work, or founding an event.
8. For a detailed discussion of how place is explored in a work for children's performance, see Caldwell, Philpott and Grenfell (2022).

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## ABSTRACT

In Australia, writing art music for children to perform has often been viewed as existing at the less glamorous end of the composition business. Yet, for those who compose music for young performers, it is an essential part of their role as creative practitioners. Many notable Australian composers, in addition to their writing for professional musicians, have written music for this age group. This article seeks to show, for the first time, the aims of Australian composers in writing music for children's performance. The results of quantitative and qualitative surveys with 77 Australian contemporary composers divulge the complexities of writing music for this genre: the reasons that Australian composers write music for young performers, the process of composing for this genre and the specialised skill set required. This study shows that many Australian composers aim to offer children an experience that transcends musical ideas and connects them to a wider world of learning, which is significant when considering the development of music education at both pre-tertiary and tertiary levels. Ultimately, it is anticipated that the current research will help to give due recognition to the value of the genre and highlight its potential benefits to composers and children alike.

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**Keywords.** Australian composers, young musicians, Australian music, music for children's performance, composition

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Holly Caldwell is a PhD candidate in musicology at the University of Tasmania's Conservatorium of Music. Her doctoral research is focused on the natural environment and history of lutruwita [Tasmania] in the compositions of Don Kay. More broadly, she maintains an interest in the intersection of music and place as well as the composition of art music for children's performance in Australia.

Dr Carolyn Philpott is a Senior Lecturer in Musicology at the University of Tasmania's Conservatorium of Music, where she is currently a Chief Investigator on two Australian Research Council grants. She has published widely in journals and books on the topics of music, place and the environment, including in *The Musical Quarterly*, *Musicology Australia*, *Popular Music and Organised Sound*. She has published a monograph on the music of Malcolm Williamson (Lyrebird Press 2018) and a co-edited collection entitled *Performing Ice* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020).

The music of composer, Maria Grenfell, has been described as 'expansive, effusive and energetic', 'magic', and 'refreshingly groovy'. Her work is influenced by poetic, literary and visual sources and non-Western music and literature. Her orchestral and chamber music has





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## APPENDIX A

### Preliminary Survey Questions:

1. Do you identify as a composer of music?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Other (please specify)
2. Do you identify as Australian?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Other (please specify)
3. What is your gender?
  - Male
  - Female
  - Prefer not to say
  - Prefer to self-describe
4. Have you written music for children's performance? ('Children' is any person under 18 years of age, and 'performance' refers to the act of children playing an instrument or singing, in any setting.)
  - A great deal
  - A lot
  - A moderate amount
  - A little
  - None at all
5. What percentage (approximate is OK) of your music has been composed for children's performance? \_\_\_\_\_%
6. What process(es) have you used to write these works? Please choose one or more options.
  - Collaboratively with young musicians
  - Non-collaboratively with a particular young musician or musicians in mind
  - Non-collaboratively with no particular young musician or musicians in mind
  - N/A
  - Other (please specify)
7. For what reason(s) do you write music for children's performance? Please choose one or more options.
  - For personal pleasure
  - For educational purposes
  - To inspire young people



- For income/I am commissioned
  - To strengthen community networks
  - Other (please specify)
8. In your compositions for children's performance what theme(s) does your music convey? Please choose one or more options.
- N/A
  - No particular theme
  - Exploration of Sound
  - Youth and Growing Up
  - Family or Friendship
  - Environmental Issues
  - Political Issues
  - History
  - Social Justice Issues
  - Love
  - Prejudice
  - Australia
  - Place
  - Flora and Fauna
  - Other (please specify)
9. Performing original Australian music helps to cultivate a stronger sense of identity in young musicians.
- Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- Why? (optional)
10. Do you wish to be contacted in the future regarding this research?
- No thanks (please contact an Investigator directly)
  - Yes, for future surveys (remain anonymous)
  - Yes, for future research (please include your name and email address in the comment box, or contact an Investigator directly)

Name and Contact Address (optional):

## APPENDIX B

### Second Survey Questions:

#### Part 1

1. What is your name?
2. How did you first come to write music for children's performance? How early in your career was this? Did you receive formal training?
3. What are some of the positives and/or negatives (as relevant) about writing music for children's performance?
4. Has it been important in your development as a composer to write music for children's performance?
5. What processes have you used to write music for children's performance?
6. Is this process different to writing music for professional musicians or adults?
7. Have there ever been any factors that have limited your output of music for children's performance?
8. How do you choose your material, thematic or otherwise, when writing music for children's performance?
9. When composing, are you conscious of how the child will respond or relate to the music?
10. Have you always lived where you live now? Has where you have lived had an effect on the music you have written?



11. To what extent have your compositions for children's performance been informed by other fields of interest, such as science, the environment, art, literature, philosophy etc.?
12. What do you aim to achieve through writing music for children's performance?
13. Professionally, do you differentiate between your music for children's performance and your other compositions? Why?
14. In your view, how important is it that young Australian musicians are exposed to music by Australian composers? Why?
15. Do you think that original music for children's performance in Australia is adequately promoted? How could this be improved?
16. Is writing music for children's performance something that you wish to pursue in the future?
17. Do you have any other comments you would like to make in relation to Australian composers and music for children's performance?

## Part 2

1. Which one of your works for children's performance are you most proud of? Why? Please include title of work.
2. Please describe the:
  - Year of work:
  - Instrumentation of work:
  - Length of work:
  - Style of work:
  - Ages and/or abilities of performers:
  - Original performance details (when, where, who):
3. What were the reason(s) for composing this work?
4. Was this work commissioned? If yes, by whom?
5. Is this work published? If yes, by which publisher?
6. Was this piece composed in consultation with a performance group? Y/N
  - Please describe the nature of your role in this project:
7. While composing this work, how did you take into account the playing abilities of the performer(s)?
8. What techniques, theme(s) and/or topic(s) are explored in this work?
9. What do you hope that young musician(s) will learn through performing this work?
10. What has the performance life of this work been since its initial performance? What factors have contributed to this?
11. Are there any other comments you would like to make in relation to this work?
  - I agree to the Student Investigator contacting me if clarification of any of the information I have provided is required. Y/N
  - If yes, how do you wish to be contacted? E.g. please give an email address, telephone number, Skype address:
  - I agree to be identified by name as a participant in the publication of these study results. Y/N